

AN INVESTIGATION OF THE LISTENING HABITS AND THE ATTITUDES TOWARD RADIO
OF RURAL RESIDENTS OF A COMPOSITE SERVICE AREA. (A SUMMARY.)

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It was the purpose of this study to determine, for a limited rural area served by the four major networks, an independent commercial station, and a non-commercial, non-network station, to what extent program services conform to prevailing tastes and values, to investigate the listening habits of the residents of the area, and to study their attitudes toward radio.

The area to be studied was determined by the application of four independent criteria: circumscription by a composite .5 millivolt contour line as measured by precise engineering instruments, inclusion in an area in which the mail response ratio is equal to that of counties within the measured .5 millivolt contour, inclusion in a primary area measured by the Broadcast Measurement Bureau, and inclusion in a primary area measured by a practical listening test with portable communications equipment.

A stratified sample of 1000 rural farm and non-farm residents was studied by means of personal interviews. A validated questionnaire which had been subjected to pre-test analysis was used, and the interviews were conducted by carefully selected teachers, by county agents, and by the author.

Among the established criteria for the evaluation of the social institution studied in this research are these: Is physical coverage adequate so that program service, regardless of its merits, will be available? Are programs sufficiently varied to provide fare for the major groups in the population they presumably serve? Do such programs meet the artistic and aesthetic standards agreed upon by experts? Do programs conform to the needs, tastes and values which prevail in the communities to be served? Is there a genuine and roughly measurable trend toward improvement in the program structure--improvement based upon the assumption that radio is not only responsible for followership of majority tastes, but is responsible for leadership in the development of better taste.

This study was concerned with the second and fourth of these questions, both of which were answered with some degree of specificity for a limited area eliminating the physical service factor involved in criterion number one.

The results of the investigation show, in general terms, that there is provided for the limited area studied, sufficiently varied fare to meet most of the recognized needs of at least two groups in the population of that area, the rural farm and rural non-farm groups. Criticisms of the available service do emerge, but for the most part satisfaction with and approval of current services predominate. It was also apparent, however, although the data do not reveal this factor so clearly as do subjective reactions noted by the author, that to some extent stated satisfactions with current fare were the result of the widespread failure on the part of the listener to realize that he might influence program patterns if his desires were made known, and the more important factor of uncritical orientation to current program offerings resulting from lack of experience with program fare of other kinds. There appears to be a tendency for the listener not only to get what is liked, but to accept what is provided.

Of the social institutions appraised in general terms, only the church was ranked as doing a better job in its area of activity than was radio. Three times as many interviewees ranked radio favorably as ranked it unfavorably, and somewhat more women than men so ranked it. Farm people tend to be slightly more favorable in their reactions than do rural non-farm residents; the farm sample reports even

more favorably on farm programs than on radio in general, and with these farm programs men find more satisfaction than do women.

All the institutions appraised tend to be subjected to more rigorous critical scrutiny as educational status increases. This holds for the reaction of farm residents to farm programs as well as to radio in general, and among farm residents those of high educational status tend to depend less upon radio for farm information than do those of relatively low educational status.

A startlingly high percentage of set ownership was revealed, with 94.1% of the rural population reporting sets in working order.

During the day women provide the greatest numbers of listeners, with farm and non-farm women being somewhat similar in extent of listening. Among the non-farm residents the middle educational groups provide the greatest numbers of "heavy" listeners, while among the farm population those with college educations provide the greatest percentage of "heavy" listeners.

Contrary to popular assumption, those who attend the movies most frequently tend to listen to the radio more than do those who are non-attenders, or infrequent attenders. There is a strikingly high comparative concentration of listening among the young adults in the sample, with those under 40 listening much more than those over the age at which "life begins." Similarly, those who read magazines with some regularity are more apt to be "heavy" listeners than are those who are non-readers.

The contrasts between listening-time peaks are much sharper when men are compared with women, than when farm residents are compared with rural non-farm residents. Among the outstanding differences is the sharp increase in availability of men during the meal periods, times during which women do not listen in such great numbers, presumably because of their meal-time responsibilities.

Radio would be missed about equally by men and woman and by farm and non-farm residents, but those who are "heavy" listeners are much more apt to miss it "a great deal" than are those who listen less.

Approximately half the sample appears to be perfectly satisfied with the number and kinds of available programs, not suggesting that more programs of any kind be aired. Those who believe radio's general contribution to be unimportant are most apt to suggest program additions, but there is no striking agreement concerning the kind of programs desired.

Only about one third of the sample reported not listening at times as a result of dissatisfaction with program fare, but two thirds say that they sometimes have their radios turned off when they are not "busy," and could, therefore, be listening. Reasons for such non-listening vary, but those most commonly reported were feelings of weariness, desire to visit with others, and desire to read without being disturbed. The latter was reported most frequently by those over forty, suggesting that younger people feel radio to be less "disturbing".

News broadcasts emerge as the most liked program type among all groups studied. Other program preferences follow, to some extent, expected patterns. Farm men like informational farm programs and market reports, listeners of high educational status are more apt to like serious music than are those of lower educational status, who in turn are more likely to prefer old time fiddlers. Women and farm residents like religious programs more than do men and non-farm residents. Those under forty like dance music, and those over forty prefer old time fiddlers and hymns, while quiz and general entertainment programs tend to rate fairly high with all groups. Classical music, liked by relatively few interviewees, is better liked by

those of high educational status.

The much discussed daytime serial is high on the dislike list for rural people regardless of sex, age, educational status or residence. It leads the "disliked" programs, with more than one fourth of the total sample disliking it. (It should be noted, however, that it is also one of the well-liked program types, especially among women.)

Somewhat surprising to many critics of radio will be the finding that classical music is high on the dislike list for all groups, being relatively high even for those of high educational status, despite the fact that it is better liked by those of high educational status.

Women tend to dislike sports broadcasts, old people dislike dance music, non-farm people dislike farm markets, but news is disliked by almost no one.

An analysis of the data shows that more than three times as many mentions were made of programs liked as of programs disliked. For whatever reason or combination of reasons, current radio fare appears to be acceptable to most rural listeners.

Because of the great mass of relatively discrete data involved in the study, a brief summary will leave the reader with an incomplete picture of the findings. Without the extensive response-tables which were a part of the original research, only general trends can be reported. The acceptability of current radio fare to the rural population studied is patent; the implications of that acceptability need further study.

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